

Rethinking pathways to print literacy: a multiliteracies perspective

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This edition of *Practically Primary* has the theme of Transitions. This article will consider the transitions that we have made from old learning to new learning as well as recognising the need to rethink literacy in the digital age so that we are enabling children to function effectively in a multimodal world where new technologies have impacted on conceptualisations of literacies that incorporate a multiliteracies perspective. In this article we also reflect on the need for teachers to assist in the transition to school. We report on a study that provided opportunities for teachers of young children to engage in professional learning sessions that required them to share ideas and pedagogies for effective learning in the early years of education. These scenarios facilitated new understandings of the learners over time and made their transition to school, with the associated focus on print literacy, smoother.

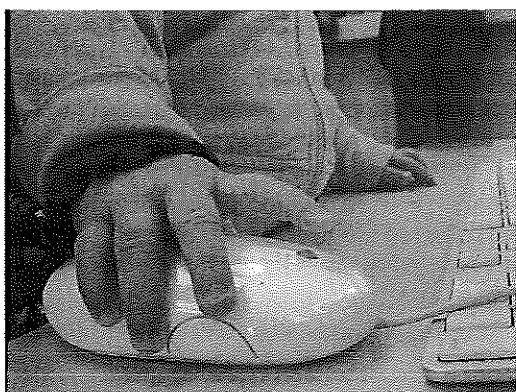
As we approach the end of the first decade of the new millennium it is evident that our world has changed significantly and the impact of new technologies has affected every part of our daily lives. Yet in terms of educational practices it is doubtful that we could say the same. We have been mapping new technologies onto old curriculum since the '80s and there seems to be little evidence to indicate that ways of teaching and learning have been significantly influenced by the use of new technologies beyond their use to reinforce heritage notions of curriculum and pedagogies. The current move towards a National Curriculum is a rationalisation of ideas rather than the reconceptualisation that is desperately needed. The focus remains on what 'stuff' should fill the curriculum rather than the generation of new ideas and creating new knowledge from what we already know. It is as if we are focused on knowledge regurgitation rather than knowledge building and re-generation. In this way we are not asking questions such as: What are the ways in which new technologies can support, challenge and extend the range of ways educators interact with learners? The students in our schools, as future workers of the twenty-first century, require skills that are

significantly different from those required in the past. New technologies have reshaped the relationship between knowledge and the technological artifacts that we all use. We need to be collaborative, multi-skilled and flexible so that we are able to solve problems and create new possibilities. These types of activities are knowledge based and don't rely on rote learning. This is, of course, a major shift in the way the world operates and those who are able to make the transition are the most effective knowledge workers of the twenty-first century.

For our children to live meaningful lives in the new millennium we need to have an education system that stimulates students to acquire and practise new skills so that they are able to generate new knowledge beyond that which we already know. We believe that this can be achieved via authentic and engaging activities, by collaborating with others, by seeking out expert assistance and knowledge from a variety of sources and by sharing the findings with a wide audience. The Internet affords the opportunity to do all of these things anywhere, anytime. Web 2.0 is currently transforming the nature of knowledge itself and twenty-first-century educators will need to identify opportunities to harness children's interest and competence in user-generated content, social networking and the opportunity to publish for a global audience. The new literacies associated with Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) are fundamental tools of the new millennium learner. This is indeed a new era in the way educators and students think about knowledge, expertise and learning.

Alongside a global change in the way communications operate, is the emergence of a new generation of learners that are fluent in the use of devices that are an integral part of their lives. In the twenty-first century, in developed countries, young children come to school having used a variety of new technologies in a myriad of contexts. Many have their own email accounts, blogs, subscribe to RSS feeds, discussion lists and are at ease with web browsers, search engines, SMS, Skype, MP3 players

and console games. The types of media children are using outside of school are often those that incorporate a number of different modes; sounds including music, written and spoken words, pictures and animations. These communication devices enable children to pay attention to many modes at the same time, the visual (graphics) aural (sounds), gestural (movement) and spatial (layout) as well as the linguistic (alphabetic text). Unlike previous generations whose texts were written, paper based, and sometimes illustrated, twenty-first-century children are attending to a lot more information simultaneously and are involved in dynamic and interactive ways with a range of texts. This is the basis of defining literacy in the twenty-first century, it is not restricted to alphabetic knowledge but is multi-faceted and multimodal, hence the term 'multiliteracies' has evolved, to describe the ways of knowing of a new generation who have learned to learn in the digital age. The briefest observation of children interacting on Skype shows their ability to use visual and gestural expression via the video facility, type text in the chat facility and select 'emoticons' to represent ideas using symbolic and graphical images. As an interactive device, Skype allows users to communicate in a range of modes simultaneously, this multimodal experience is part of the everyday worlds twenty-first-century children inhabit, and fundamentally changes the way they perceive, engage with and experience learning.



What works in classrooms?

In a research project with Australian teachers that spanned three years, we explored the ways in which classroom teachers can take advantage of the new literacies that young children bring to school in the twenty-first century. We have now published the results of this work in a book entitled *Rethinking learning in early childhood education* (Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke & Harrison, 2008). Using case studies of individual children and learning scenarios, we described how teachers changed from viewing

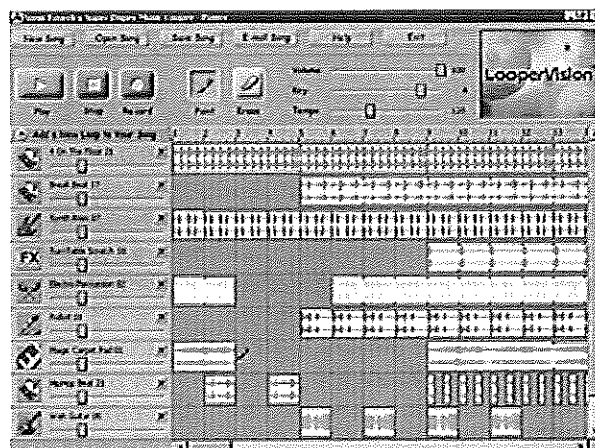
literacy (in the singular) to a multiliteracies perspective and accordingly were able to connect with students who were not succeeding in a traditional learning context with heritage teaching methods. The stories from our research demonstrate how redesigning curriculum approaches and rethinking practices enables teachers to access a wide range of strategies in order for students to demonstrate what they know and can do at school. The following case story highlights the ways one student was able to communicate his understanding using a range of modes. The teacher's role in providing resources and experiences to elicit his multiliterate responses is crucial. The following case story gives a clear example of the ways the theory of multiliteracies can be incorporated into everyday classroom practices.

Alex in pre-school

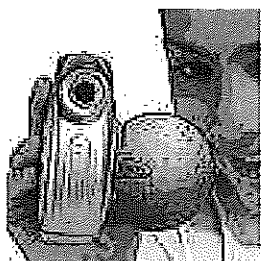
Alex loved coming to kindergarten and enjoyed playing with blocks, cars, trains and especially the computer. Alex's preschool teacher, Cindy, had a very positive image of him as a learner. Although she had clear general intentions for her pre-schoolers' learning, she was very open to any direction they chose to pursue and particularly placed value on imaginative and divergent thinking. In this sense, Cindy's program was 'emergent'.

Introducing new literacies activities in the pre-school

Cindy was keen to explore new literacies with Alex and, as part of her approach, she introduced the software program Super Dooper Music Looper. This was one way to enable Alex to extend his experience of communicating in multiple modes. This software enables children to record their own vocals, select instruments and compose songs. It is also possible to include sound effects and to email the composition to others. (see <http://www.sonycreativesoftware.com/products/sdml/sdml.asp>)



To accompany the visual and aural dimensions of the software, Cindy had also set out a range of musical instruments on the floor, including a shaker, drum, piano, triangle and tambourine. Alex was quick to pick up on Cindy's modelling of ways of interacting with and through technology. He readily made connections between the visual, gestural and aural modes. Cindy's program and careful planning had afforded Alex an opportunity to be successful and to show his competence with communication. Had Cindy used a rote learning strategy to 'teach' Alex alphabetic knowledge, his capacity to generate meaning would have been restricted to his command of the grapho-phonetic and would not have enabled him to make connections and create meaning beyond the words he was able to read, write and spell.



On another occasion, Cindy had used the video camera as a device for documentation of children's learning. She roamed the classroom recording children's responses to her prompt to 'Tell me about this ...'. When Alex had a turn with the camera, he approached one child and said, 'Sandra, wot ya

doing?' Sandra responded to him, then he moved on to the next child, saying their name and prompting them to tell him about the activity they were engaged in. Cindy was excited to see this interaction taking place, she believed that the opportunity to use a video camera enhanced Alex's repertoire of communication. Alex had picked up the protocols of filming events and was acting in a 'reporter' role to document his peers' learning.

As a follow up to these initial experiences, Cindy extended the work to other children and this included using pictures and the microphone to make a song, drawing pictures of family members, taking photographs with the digital camera and making slide shows. Children were often asked 'What music would suit your picture?' to encourage an exploration of mood and aural communication. Cindy found that Alex enjoyed expressing himself through movement to sounds, rhythm and beat. Concepts such as fast/slow, heavy/light, loud/soft were extended through movement to music. Clearly, there are cross-curricular connections to be made in authentic ways by using technologies as an integral part of the program, rather than an add-on or reward for early finishers.

Alex goes to school

Our project enabled us to stay with Alex as a research participant in his transition to school.

It is clear that engagement of Alex improved when both his interests and preferred ways of learning were identified and used to design curriculum experiences and to deepen his capacity to connect modalities for communicating. Working with Alex using a multiliteracies approach focused on problem solving where teachers were more likely to construct his lack of success as a need to change their way of working with him. This contrasts with deficit approaches that focus on what a child can't or is not doing when they are not successful in relation to literacy practice.

Alex's story prompts reflections on how multiliteracies approaches enable a more positive image of the child to be constructed which in turn leads to the development of children's feelings of self-efficacy and subsequently on their successful learning. In particular, the following arise:

- Multiliteracies theory assists teachers to construct a school curriculum that balances the development of foundational literacy skills with the fostering of children's ideas, interests and curiosity.
- Foundational print literacy skills be taught in ways that fosters children's sense of self-efficacy and confidence through the use of multiple modes (visual, aural, gestural, alphabetic and spatial).

Reference

Yelland, N.J., Lee, L., O'Rourke, M. & Harrison, C. (2008) *Rethinking learning in early childhood education*. Buckingham: OUP. Available from McGraw-Hill at www.mcgraw.hill.com

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